

WHAT'S AN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN DOING GETTING A PH.D. IN EDUCATION?

by Alexius Smith Macklin



Let me start by saying that I am writing to you poolside at a resort in Orlando. I'm in between sessions right now at the International Institute for Informatics and Systemics. In two hours, I will be presenting my paper on information and communication technology (ICT) literacy and assessment in higher education. This paper is the culmination of a yearlong collaboration with the Educational Testing Service on a new tool designed to measure the ICT competencies of sophomores and juniors. In my study, I worked to integrate these skills directly into course content, and evaluated the outcome with the ICT Literacy Assessment (for more information go to: www.ets.org). The result was a curriculum intended to monitor incremental progress of students' skill acquisition during a 15-week semester.

Presenting my research at an international conference of this type is not something I would have pursued before working on my doctorate. In part, I think that my study would not have been interesting to people outside of librarianship. I would not have known how to speak the language of assessment, nor would I have known how to set up an investigation that required me to collect data systematically to achieve my research goals. Now that I have all of my coursework completed, and three chapters of my dissertation done . . . I am comfortable saying that I really know what it takes to do the kind of research that is respected across disciplines in academia. I am not necessarily good at "doing" research – yet – but I understand how to develop a study that requires a rigorous approach to testing hypotheses and interpreting data.

Librarians who do not hold a Ph.D. really do not understand how to conduct research. Oh, I know that some of you are disagreeing with me right now. I would have too a few years ago . . . but, let's face it – very few master of library science (MLS) degree programs include courses on research methods to teach future librarians how to collect and analyze data; rather, we are trained to help researchers find information to support their work. This in and of itself is noble . . . I'm not dismissing the importance of our business. We

know how to interpret an information need, navigate databases, and synthesize found information into different formats for recall and use, which is essential in our information-driven society, but we don't necessarily know how to apply a methodology to our work. This knowledge is what sets our scholarship apart from those who do.

So, what's a Ph.D. going to do for me? What has it done already? For starters, I want to talk about the three Rs:

- **Rigor** – The first thing I learned about in my doctoral program was that all good research – emphasis on the word GOOD – begins and ends with a methodical collection and analysis of data to support a hypothesis. This systematic approach is what is known as rigor. Your research question directs the appropriate selection of a methodology (qualitative and/or quantitative) for your study. Sounds simple – but it is actually one of the most complex processes to apply. Doing it well takes time and practice. Frequently, the literature in librarianship is of the type that talks about how we did something well . . . but it doesn't always have the empirical data to support the claims we make. Applying rigor to our research would give us the advantage of knowing that the results we are claiming really do have value . . . and not only because we said so.
- **Respect** – The next important lesson I learned is that respect is earned – the hard way. The path to the doctorate is often difficult, and you make mistakes along the way. When I first tried to apply rigor to my various investigations I failed miserably to understand what a theoretical framework was, how to formulate meaningful research questions, and how to organize my data collection so that it made sense. Often it just felt like I was stabbing in the dark trying to figure out what I was observing or even what information I should be collecting in the first place (never mind what method I should use!). With time and practice (and reading LOTS of

journals in and out of the fields of education and librarianship) I started to see patterns in how other scholars organized their research and disseminated results. I tried to emulate those I trusted – and found out through personal conversations that they too faced the same challenges I was facing in the learning process.

- Results – Once I saw patterns in how others collected, interpreted, and shared information about their data, I began to apply these to my own research goals. It took a few attempts before I was able to communicate my results efficiently, but eventually, I found ways to be clear and concise about the purpose of my research, what methods I used to collect and analyze my data, what significant outcomes were identified from my study, and what I was going to do with the findings. The ability to communicate with others these results is critical to earning respect and recognition for your work . . . and it opens the doors to collaboration. Now that I have empirical data to support the need for ICT literacy education, faculty are coming to me with their research needs!

Finally, earning a Ph.D. is helping me move my profession in a positive direction. Faculty see me as an equal. . . not simply because I have the same title and

tenure (which I do) . . . but because I can speak the rhetoric of research. My primary focus is in curriculum and assessment; as such, I am using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection to conduct my studies in ICT literacy integration. Because these skills are fundamental across disciplines, I am able work in partnership on many levels to with faculty . . . doors that would never have opened to me if I wasn't earning a Ph.D. Will it make me rich? That depends on what you consider rich. Personally, being a valued contributor to research in and out of librarianship – where I can promote the good that we do – is at least enough to make me feel prosperous. Most importantly, I am fulfilling a lifelong dream . . . and, at the end of the day . . . isn't that all that really matters? So, if you even think you might want to go for your Ph.D. – know that the road ahead of you might be difficult at times – but in the end, I believe the journey has been worth it all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexius Smith Macklin (alexius@purdue.edu) wrote this article in August. She is well-known for her expertise in problem-based learning, distance learning, digital libraries, and general informatics. In her role as an information designer, she has helped many faculty members to redesign their courses to take advantage of the power of technology in seeking and organizing information.

Many educators of note, as well as college and university librarians, have emphasized the urgent necessity of instruction and training in 'book-using skill.'

'The place of the library in the work of all departments is one of increasing importance. The library is a resource or reservoir from which the student should draw constantly for information and inspiration, whether his interest lies in history, literature, or science. Every month of delay in instructing him in the meaning and use of the library lessens the efficiency of his course.'

Hopkins, Florence, M. Reference guides that should be known and how to use them. Detroit, MI. The Willard Company, 1916. Hopkins, a librarian with the Detroit, Michigan, Central High School, quotes the above in her foreword from the United States Bureau of Education, 1914-no. 34.